

Mandy 1946

The Community Center  
and the  
Returning Veteran

*Lt. Col. Julius Schreiber, M. C. (Ret.)*







# The Community Center and the Returning Veteran

Lt. Col. Julius Schreiber, M.C. (Ret.)

Former Chief, Program Section, Army Orientation Branch  
Information and Education Division, War Department

WE have defeated the fascist nations on the battlefield—but fascism is not dead—neither in Germany, Italy, or Japan, nor in the hearts and minds of some here in our own country. The damage which the poison of fascism brings about does not suddenly disappear when the last shot has been fired. The threat of fascism still hangs over all of us and may rise yet again unless citizens understand how fascism comes about—unless they actively participate in the business of making our democracy work.

We are concerned with a very basic question, How will the Jewish Community Center be affected by the returning Jewish servicemen? I submit that to answer this question requires that we take a much broader look at the problem and see all of the returning servicemen in the total perspective—for except for certain specific colorations, which I will discuss shortly, the serviceman of Jewish faith is essentially no different from his other fellow-Americans of non-Jewish faiths.

It will be profitable to recall that the men who came into the armed services were essentially youngsters who had grown up in the 20's and 30's. Our country had done little to prepare them for an ideological war. Misguided pacifism and isolationism had convinced millions of adults and youths alike that "if we would only mind our own business and let Europe alone," war elsewhere in the world would never involve us.

But they heard more than pacifism and isolationism.

Throughout the 1930's Americans were subjected to a barrage of propaganda emanating from Berlin and Rome and Tokyo. And many of these themes were not only echoed by Americans but in many instances seemed to have been improved upon and propagated with special intensity by some of our own people. Propaganda was directed against all of the nations who were later to become our Allies. "Imperialistic Britain!," "Communist Russia!," and "Yellow Peril China!" were labels used over and over again in the certain sections of the press, the radio, the public forums and in personal conversations.

But the creation of *allied disunity* was not all that the enemy sought. The "divide and conquer" technique was also directed against religious, racial, economic and political groups in our country. White and Negro, gentile and Jew were played against each other. And with it all went a variety of name-calling: "Damned

Reactionary!," "Damned Communist!," "Damned Catholic!," "Damned Protestant!," "Damned Jew!," "Damned Nigger!," "Damned Wop!," "Damned Irish!," "Damned Business!," "Damned Labor!,"—it was a field day for the damns and the hates. Dormant intolerance and prejudices were fanned and flamed and millions of the young men of our country were first hand witnesses of all this—some were even participants.

Then came Pearl Harbor!

Month after month hundreds of thousands of our youth poured into the army. They brought with them all the doubts and suspicions and prejudices that they shared with their families and friends and neighbors. It was not at all unusual to hear new soldiers say that "we were sucked in by that war-monger in the White House," or that "Imperialistic Britain had finally roped us in!," or that, as a matter of fact, we were going to war in behalf of "Communist Russia," or the "Jews," or "Wall Street." In short, many far too many, felt that they were being called upon to risk their lives for a cause that was not their own!

This lack of orientation to the realities of life and to the history of the world forced many of our soldiers to pay a heavy tribute. Resentment, anxiety, and hatred were directed against the President, or the Congress, or the army, or the allies, or racial, religious, and economic groups—instead of channelized against the enemy. Small wonder, then, that confusion and a sense of frustration and anxiety took hold. Men who were not deeply convinced in the righteousness of our cause and the need to destroy the enemy, even at the risk of their own personal safety, could not reasonably be expected to escape serious emotional disturbances.

They had been separated from their families; had given up their jobs; closed their businesses and offices; interrupted their studies at school. They surrendered their civilian individuality and became part of a mass machine. They were taught "the Army way" of living and were subjected to new "rules and regulations." And with it all there was the constant situation wherein each was invited to run the risk of getting seriously hurt, of losing an eye or a limb, of getting his skull smashed!

And if men don't believe—if they don't see the sense of it—if they can't *personalize* the issues of war—they are bound to have serious emotional and behavior problems—and thousands upon thousands did!

The army recognized this and tried to do something about it.

\*This article is a condensation of an address given by Col. Schreiber at the annual meeting of the Jewish Center Division of the National Jewish Welfare Board.



The Army Orientation Program was designed to meet this problem. It was based upon the assumption that if the men would understand, in personal terms, *why* they fought; *what* they were fighting *for*; and *what* they were fighting *against*, they would work, train, and fight better. Space limitations permit me to make but one passing comment on this entire program. The principles upon which it was based were valid. And wherever the program was permitted to function effectively, it paid off with excellent results.

Unfortunately, however, the Army Orientation Program failed to achieve all of its objectives. It is not too much to say that less than a third of the units in the army had an effective orientation program. The majority of the military camps and units had mediocre or poor orientation programs. There are many reasons for this failure and high among them are two. The failure of many commanding officers to give full support to the program, and the constant difficulty in finding suitable personnel to function as orientation officers.

#### *And Now They Are Returning*

The returning servicemen, then, are not uniform in their understanding of the events that led up to the war, the underlying issues of the war, and the national and international problems that confront our nation now.

Perhaps the returning veteran's only claim—and it would seem a justifiable one—is that the country which he helped defend should give him a hand in picking up where he left off. This is in the nature of a re-investment on the part of the community in its own future. It may safely be said that pensions and bonuses are not paramount in the thinking of large numbers of the returning soldiers. And even those who may ask for such will very likely be motivated to do so primarily because they fear that they will have to “shift for themselves,” without any *real* outside help.

Like all of us, one of the primary concerns of the returning soldier is economic security. He knows that his mustering-out pay will hardly go much further than buying him a decent wardrobe, a few personal effects, and a little extra to pay for some immediate wants of his own or his wife or family. What he wants more than anything else is undoubtedly a job, preferably at a trade or profession which he likes and at a decent living wage, and in which he can see himself making some progress. He knows that without this living will be most unattractive, to say the least; and he looks to you, his fellow-citizens, to help him get started again.

But the soldier has not fought a war merely to come back to a job, alone. He was told that he was fighting a war in order to make it possible for the democratic way of life to really function. And *many* of the thinking and vocal among them will insist that these things come about!

*But what of the soldiers who have not learned the*

*lessons of the war?* What if out of the millions of men who are returning to the country there are large numbers who may not be so conscious of their obligations as citizens, who may be extremely impatient and bitter over their failure to find a decent job and decent pay? What may happen if such soldiers are sought out and exploited by those who seek to use them for their own undemocratic ends?

Let us never forget the lessons of the last war. Our own country had a problem with many of its veterans of World War I. And we know what happened in Germany and in Italy—unemployed veterans make good Storm Troopers!

Let us be brutally frank about it. If the returning veterans fail to find a niche for themselves in the community and in the country—not as a group apart, not as veterans, but as fellow-citizens—if they fail to find it possible to achieve personal security and dignity then our country may find that it has destroyed fascism in Germany and Italy and Japan only to bring it about here.

Fascism comes to a country when a group of individuals, by use of clever propaganda, convince enough of the people in that country that they, the people, will benefit by allowing this group to govern them. Once in power, fascists stand revealed as being actually a government “by the few and for the few”—a group of ruthless men in complete control of the economic, political, social and cultural life of the state. Since so radical a change in the form of government is not very easily accomplished, the transition to fascism is, at first, made easier by carefully laid propaganda campaigns which promise all things to all people. To gain the backing of powerful industrialists, they offer to protect their interest. To the middle and working classes, they make equally luring promises. To make the seizure of power a simpler task, they cleverly create national disunity by playing political, religious, racial, social and economic groups against each other. A confused and disunited people can offer no effective resistance.

But fascism does not come to a country suddenly—it does not, like a bolt of lightning, strike a hitherto well organized and well functioning democracy. No, fascism is much more insidious; it needs the damp, fertile soil which results when democratic institutions and practices begin to rot because of neglect on the part of its citizens. A wholesome and vigorous democracy does not lend itself to fascist growth.

What lessons can we learn?

First, when economic security is threatened or lost, people may sell their civil liberties in their search of food and shelter. The millions of our returning veterans may not be particularly immune to such a step. Let us never forget what happened in Germany and Italy after World War I.

Second, fascists rarely reveal their ultimate aim in



their propaganda. Fascist propagandists attract the miserable, the frightened, and many who down deep in their hearts are not truly identified with democracy. People with prejudices or hatreds for those of a different color or creed or economic group or political persuasion can find many points of agreement with those who advocate fascism. Seeing but the realization of their immediate desires and failing to see that ultimately they, too, will be caught in the same trap, many such people are likely to be "sucked in."

Third, the best defense against the development of fascism, anywhere—even in our own country, for surely none of us are so naive as to believe fascism could not happen here—the best defense against fascism is the actual practice of democracy in our day-by-day living.

#### *The Jewish Veteran*

"How much of the foregoing applies to the Jewish serviceman?" someone may ask.

There can be no general answer. It does not, however, require a shrewd man to guess that the experiences and wants and hopes of the Jewish serviceman differ very little, if at all, from the rest of his fellow Americans.

Surely the Jewish Community Center workers would find it difficult to say that their experience with Jewish servicemen would suggest to them that "the foregoing applies to other American soldiers but not to Jews!"

Jews have their share of servicemen who do not really understand the fundamental nature of this war. True, it required very little to get expressions of hatred for Hitler. Yet many a Jewish soldier was and is as benighted in his attitudes toward other minority groups as are others toward his group! The phrase "damned Nigger" is not a monopoly of white non-Jews. And fascist philosophy was and is as appealing to some of our Jewish youth (without, of course, its anti-Semitic aspects) as it was and is to some other Americans of non-Jewish faith.

And so it is with other aspects of the problem. One was just as likely to find a "gold brick" among the men of Jewish faith as one did among the men of Protestant or Catholic faith.

Nor is the average Jewish boy, any more than the average non-Jewish boy, returning to a luxurious home where a wealthy family awaits to do his bidding.

It is my belief that by and large the problems which returning Jewish servicemen may have are essentially the same problems which face *all* of America and this is just as true for the Catholic, the Negro, and the foreign-born. I don't mean to imply that members of minority groups have "easy sailing"—we are still a somewhat sick nation—our country, as a whole, has yet to grow up and our citizens have yet to practice in their daily lives the principles of our democratic credo.

If the Community Center worker will agree with this thesis, he will also agree that his efforts in behalf of returning Jewish servicemen must include, in addition

to all else, a vigorous pro-democracy educational program.

Let us consider what this man has brought back with him. There is no question but that he has changed. He is no longer the immature youngster who it seemed only yesterday played baseball on the corner sandlot. He has been considerably sobered—and this is essentially true of even the man who did not get overseas. Military life did things to him and for him.

A Community Center worker might well make a list of the significant attributes and experiences which the returning servicemen bring to the community. For example, such a list might begin with:

#### A. Some *desirable* experiences and qualities provided by, and deriving from, army life:

1. Increased capacity for group work, group play, group study.
2. Positive relationships with men of different race, creed, and color.
3. Study of world issues and the feeling of real-life participation in such events.
4. A more serious concern for national and international affairs.
5. Increased capacity for self-discipline.
6. Development of leadership potentials.
7. Sympathetic understanding of "the other guy."
8. Acquisition of military skills which will prove useful in civilian life.
9. Increased knowledge and training in personal hygiene and first aid.
10. The development of sound physical health and prowess.
11. Marked increase of self-confidence.
12. Recognition of the value of, and the tendency to seek, expert counseling (chaplains, psychiatrists, vocational guidance, etc.).

#### B. Some *desirable* experiences *not provided* (or interrupted) by army life:

1. Normal family and social life, particularly normal male-female relationships.
2. Full-time attendance at school.
3. Good civilian jobs and businesses, with the accompanying feelings of economic security.
4. Adequate time for cultural pursuits.
5. Continued interest and activity in Jewish communal life.

#### C. Some *non-desirable* experiences and tendencies deriving from army life:

1. The extreme submerision of the individual to the group (which in many cases was not offset by the development of a high capacity for individual decisions and actions).
2. Feelings of inadequacy and inferiority to those of higher rank or position.
3. Anxiety concerning personal future—eco-



nomic, family, social, educational, etc.

4. Cynicism and doubts, in some, concerning the worthwhileness of the war and the future of democracy.

D. Some *non-desirable* traits which were *removed* by army experience.

1. Provincialism.
2. "Me first—the hell with the rest."
3. Notions of superiority because of race, color, creed, place of birth, ancestry, economic status, or social position.

Certainly the professional worker knows that generalizations are dangerous and unscientific. Certain things are true of many men or most men, but rarely, if ever, true of all men. Yet, it is believed that if the Community Center worker will consider the returning servicemen in the light of the above suggested list and, further, if he will add other general information that he knows about these men, he should be able to develop a dynamic Center program.

I am not too concerned with the social and recreational program of the Community Center, since I am sure that an excellent program of that kind will be provided. Although I should like to remind you that such a program should not be conducted as a separate veterans' activity. *Re-integration means re-integration.* The sooner these men become full participants in the total mixed-group activities, the healthier for them.

I am likewise certain that a good Community Center program will provide an opportunity for the leisure-time pursuit of cultural and vocational subjects. What I want to see, however, is something more.

#### *A Dynamic Educational Program*

Today, our country is confronted with a host of serious national and international problems. No one worthy of the name "American citizen" can afford just to sit back and vegetate. What is vitally needed is active, functioning citizenship—on the part of all of us.

As was pointed out earlier, there is a grave danger that many veterans may fail to see themselves as civilians whose job it is to work with their fellow-citizens for the total good of the country. There may be some returning servicemen, encouraged by selfish interest groups, who may tend to see themselves as a powerful "political pressure group," a "Me-first" veterans' bloc!

Education in citizenship, then, is a *must* in a Community Center program. But such an educational program will fail if it deals with abstractions. It must be brought down to earth in the living terms of the particular community.

Abstract discussions may be enlightening and stimulating, but they do not become sources of really useful information nor do they motivate social action until the abstractions are brought down to concrete daily life experiences, particularly in the terms of the community in which the discussants live. For example, a discussion

of the meaning, origin, and principles of democracy becomes vital when consideration is given to methods of applying these democratic principles in the city of, say, Detroit or Cleveland or New York or wherever the Community Center is located.

There is a special area of education in citizenship which should have the special attention of Jews. This is a delicate matter and before we proceed let us make our position clear. Jews *are* citizens of the United States and as such they are entitled to all the privileges and benefits that derive from such citizenship; and on the other hand, they are not obligated to do more than that which is asked of any other citizen. There is no room in America for "second-class citizens." However, until *all* Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, have matured and have actually begun to practice the teachings of American democracy, we must accept the realistic fact that scoundrels and subversive people are constantly seeking to exploit the improper behavior of even a single member of any minority group in order to smear all of the people of that particular minority group.

How often have we heard the vicious slander that "all Negroes are so and so" because of the misconduct of one particular Negro? The same is said of Catholics, and the same is said of Jews.

I am not speaking of mannerisms or personal habits, or mode of dress—these are individual traits and tastes which so long as they are not anti-social in nature are clearly the concern of the individual concerned. I am, however, concerned with the fact that all too often some of our fellow Jews fail to carry out their *obligations* as *citizens*. True, it may be argued that there is no sense in laboring this point since Jews, just as non-Jews, have their so-called "good" and so-called "bad." Yet it must not be forgotten that those who seek to disrupt American unity, who seek to divide our nation and play group against group, are eagerly seeking to pick up and exploit isolated instances where Jews conduct themselves improperly, in order that they might castigate *all* Jews.

It is therefore suggested that the Community Center offer a series of frequently recurring sessions wherein there is frank discussion of these problems—particularly as they occur in the local community. But these discussions will prove to be no more than a mere exercise in local gossip unless they result in serious consideration of methods whereby these discrepancies can be eliminated.

The Community Center should have a weekly current events meeting. In fact, there should be several such current events meetings going on simultaneously since the size of a discussion group has a great deal to do with whether or not it will be effective. A discussion group with more than 25 to 30 participants soon proves to be unwieldy. It is better to have three or four groups of 15 to 20 people participating than a single large group of 50 to 75 with a handful taking the lead



and the majority sitting back as a mute audience.

And what about things more specifically Jewish? Do we not have a tremendous opportunity to pick up again, or start for the first time, a really sincere interest in Jewish community life? How many of our Jewish young men really know anything more than just the names of the large number of national Jewish organizations? When they are asked by fellow-Jews, let alone fellow non-Jews, for their ideas on, say, Zionism, are they prepared to venture sound opinions based upon factual information? And further, can they discuss intelligently the pros and cons of the various trends within that movement?

What do they know about the purpose of the National Jewish Welfare Board? What do they know of the purpose and philosophy of the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Conference, the B'nai B'rith, the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish War Veterans, and the host of other Jewish agencies and organizations?

Returning Jewish servicemen are outspokenly displeased with the apparent "lack of unity" and "the working at cross-purposes" between the many national

Jewish agencies and organizations. Do we not have, in these returning veterans, a tremendous force for change—a leadership potential which can be tapped in order to help forge the vitally needed unity within the Jewish community of America?

And may not the Jewish veteran be utilized as an effective symbol for our Jewish youngsters? The judicious selection of intelligent and sincere veterans for active participation and leadership in the various youth activities of the Community Center would certainly be extremely worthwhile. Certainly those veterans who can effectively interpret the meaning of the war to our younger people can make an invaluable contribution to our educational efforts in behalf of Jewish youth. Are we ready to take advantage of our opportunities?

In conclusion, may I merely state that the so-called problem of the returning serviceman and his challenge to the community is but one facet of the over-all problem that we Americans have; namely, to make our democracy work.

Democracy can work! BUT—it costs a lot to make it work—a lot of money, a lot of time, a lot of effort, and a lot of personal comfort—but it will cost us everything if we fail!



